DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 773 CS 212 982

AUTHOR Addison, Elizabeth
TITLE A Real-World Writer Reenters the Classroom: Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones.
PUB DATE 23 Mar 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Theory; Writing Assignments; Writing Difficulties; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory

ABSTRACT

After several years in academic public relations, a professional writer returned to teaching composition. After her first attendance at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, she experienced a turning point in her view of "the essay." Following the conference, she changed her assignments from standard expository essays to other forms, such as writing personal letters, allowing the students to tap into their own personal experiences. Three papers written by the same student illustrate the positive changes that occurred. Later, an article on rhetorical axiology provided the instructor/writer with a theoretical base to understand what had happened, and she began to relate this to her personal writing experiences which were targeted for specific audiences, and which were improved by the use of a word processor. As the writer began to teach composition, using "Helping Circles," journal writing, and prewriting, and emphasizing inner experience, she found that there were still problems in getting her students to write expressively and with rhetorical value. Finally, she decided to teach her own writing process--to write along with the students, something she never thought about doing with her students when she was a graduate student. Now, she hopes to transfer more of the strengths of professional writing to the freshman composition course. Letter writing has been her most frequent solution, because it makes audience and rhetorical situation easy for students to adopt.
(PRA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED337773

A Real-World Writer Reenters the Classroom: Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones

Elizabeth Addison

CS212982

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elizabeth Addison

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A Real-World Writer Reenters the Classroom: Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones

Presented at the
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Boston, Massachusetts, March 23, 1991

Elizabeth Addison
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, North Carolina

The story I am going to tell here is, to some extent, the story of a life. It is the story of a very good student who knew what she wanted to be when she grew up. But growing up led into unanticipated byways, the lost princess wandering in a wood, occasionally seeing the ivory tower in the distance, sometimes closer, sometimes farther, but she didn't seem to make much progress, always so occupied with caring for her horse, keeping herself fed and her clothes mended, taking care of wounded animals she found along the way, and noting her observations in her journal.

A day came when she found herself at the castle door, the tower there waiting for her. All she had to do was get across the moat. Aha, she said, let me remember those good lessons of my youth so I can play this part aright. Having been an exemplary student who kept everything, she brought out themes and topics from her dusty saddlebags--ideas that once seemed appropriate, but now they were dry bones, lifeless, no marrow left in them. She needed a bridge.

And then she picked up her journal. There she found copious notes, still gritty with road-dust. She sat down on a rock to

think and review. There were plenty of rocks about, she observed, and the moat was shallow . . . .

What we need are stepping stones. What we have are stepping stones. We came to this point through a series of stepping stones, and we simply need to find the next step.

I'm not sure I was ever a princess, but I certainly was lost, and for a long time, at that. As a member of the "lost generation of scholars" who finished degrees in the seventies and early eighties, I was thrust by circumstances not quite from the academy but from academic writing into the academy's public relations world, a world where writing mattered--where, through university publications, people might or might not choose my university, give money, come to events, understand what was going on.

"My university" now was--and is--a small regional university in a rural area. No longer was I writing just for a professor or a scholarly colleague, but for students who are the first in their families to get to college. I wrote for the average newspaper reader and for the professor, for the high school guidance counselor and for the student, and for that student's uncolleged parents. These were the ones among whom I had to arouse interest, move, communicate, persuade, and create community. My job was to find out what was good and promote it. One line on a poster might be as effective as 500 words in a newsletter. A fragment might be more effective than a sentence, a comma splice less interruptive than a semicolon.

I learned to write short sentences, use common words and

natural speech patterns, explain complexities in simple terms, cut the "fog index" to a minimum. I got good at it--good enough to get paid by regional arts and tourist publications on the side. My favorite form became the interview story, talking to people and presenting their interests in an interesting way.

But I never quite gave up my dream of "professing"--not only writing, and getting better at it, but teaching how to write. When I finally got a chance to teach again, however, I ran into problems. I was fine in the general ed literature course; if my paper topics didn't always succeed, at least I was able to start with what the students got out of the material and go on from there. Composition was another story.

I was teaching 102, which at my university combines literary analysis with composition and the research paper. It's supposed to be a writing course, but it's writing about literature. Where the standard syllabus said "Essay 1," I assigned an essay on a short story. By "essay," I sort of expected a five-paragraph theme like the kind my Duke students--many of them products of Advanced Placement courses--wrote when I was a graduate assistant more than ten years earlier. Our text then was Sheridan Baker's The Practical Stylist, and I had embraced his approach with gusto. I liked--still like--his techniques for sharper writing, and I found it easy to teach his "keyhole" essay (1) with its funnel introduction.

Of course, my students now were nothing like those at Duke, and since we weren't using Baker as our text, I did not tell them anything about how to write such a theme. After all, I had

written quite a few English essays myself before I went to Duke, and I had never thought in terms of keyholes or five-paragraph structures.(2) Nevertheless, though I wasn't so old-fashioned to disallow the use of first person, I expected nice little expository essays with a clear thesis in the first paragraph, followed by several paragraphs clearly related to the thesis--I loved the topic sentence outline--and full of "good specific details." Because we use a common midterm and final, holistically scored by other faculty, my colleagues would expect my students to write such essays even if I did not. Personal flavor--or "marrow"--was not necessarily required.

Needless to say, my assignments got mixed results. Class discussions might go well, but no matter what I asked, the papers seemed to miss the mark. Write an essay on foreshadowing in "Young Goodman Brown" or "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Write an essay on setting in "Araby" or point of view in "A Rose for Emily." The results were scarcely worth reading. No marrow, no fun, nothing. When we came to poetry, I was more in the dark than ever about what they could handle and gave a broadly defined topic (maybe it would be better to call it a poorly defined topic, hardly a topic at all--but one very similar to the poetry assignment I had been given as an freshman). I left for spring break very uneasy about what would happen.

During spring break, thanks to a good deal on plane tickets, I attended CCCC for the first time, and in Chicago something happened to <u>me</u>. It was a watershed. Just looking at the program was an education: I was astonished at the range and particularity of sessions and papers being presented. But I wasn't sure

where to start, what I would know enough about, what I needed the most. And the first session I could get to had a presentation by Donald Murray, whom I wanted to hear.

It turned out his co-speaker was Mimi Schwartz, and together they were amazing. Then I heard wonderful papers by Pat Hoy II and Nancy Sommers. These sessions awakened something in me, fed something already at work in me about the need to write one's life and experience. It set the direction of my conference, because virtually every time slot had a session relating to autobiography or "the essay"--the essay not as a precise little form but as a personal statement with a personal voice, not disembodied exposition but life itself. Having lunched at the Art Institute and walked the streets of Chicago, I came home filled with renewed desire for art, for self-expression, for the transformation of my own personal experience into words that reflect my personal vision. And why was I not allowing my students to write more out of their own experience? I was teaching 102, not 101--the course that lends itself to personal writing--yet surely I could find some way to tap into these students' experience of the literature we were reading, or their experience of trying to write about it.

So I went home. I went back to students who had been given what was, to them, a bewildering assignment--take one of these poems on the theme of death, write about the author's attitude toward death and how he or she uses poetic devices to convey that attitude. Before taking up the poetry papers from their anxious authors, I asked them to write me a letter about the experience

of writing the paper. If they preferred, they could write the letter to a favorite high school English teacher or another person. In the next class, after they attended a poetry reading by Brendan Galvin, they wrote another letter based upon that experience. I told Galvin I hadn't decided how to get their response to his reading, and he suggested they propose activities for his two-day stay in our mountains. So I had them address the letter to the committee responsible for the poet's stay and base their suggestions on what they knew of the area and what they had learned of his interests in the poetry.

On the handout, I've given you all three of these papers by the same student, a young man majoring in natural resources management who always sat in the extreme back corner of the room with the bill of his cap pulled low over his eyes, ready to crack a joke about something going on in the class. In 101, he had been taught by a colleague who insists on a sort of fill-in-the-blank essay, each paragraph starting with an explicit topic sentence and containing two examples linked by a transition word. I don't know how much that constrained Mark, who came from a small town in upper South Carolina. In any case, as the handout shows, poetry is not his metier. In the first selection, he fulfills none of the assigned tasks. He does not define the attitude toward death. Although he mentions theme, rhyme, irony, and tone, he does not show how poetic elements are used to convey the attitude. The careless errors and omissions indicate severe inattention, and the language is flaccid and lifeless because he has absolutely nothing to say.

But look at the second selection. It's as if he took off a

strait jacket. He adopts a voice--identified in his closing as that of the "country bumpkin"--reminiscent of Huck Finn's, and the letter is as different from the earlier piece as Huckleberry Finn was from the novels it eclipsed. Not a lot of substance, and perhaps a poor choice of audience (what does the president have to do with any of this?), but at least it's a better read. The last piece falls in between: more substance than either of the other pieces, less flavor than the second but more than the first. And his suggested activities are apropos.

At the time, I felt we had experienced a "Eureka" phenomenon. My students did not suddenly become better writers, but I felt I was beginning to grasp how to help them become better. Unfortunately, because of the common syllabus, we had to spend most of the rest of the course stumbling through a literary research paper my students were not ready to write.

Recently, Richard Fulkerson's article in CCC (3) gave me a theoretical base to understand what had happened. I had inadvertently discovered the rhetorical axiology, something I intuitively knew from my years as a writer in public information. There I had learned to write for specific audiences, audiences that might not want to read what I wrote as much as the university wanted them to. It was my job not only to persuade them of something but to persuade them to read my persuasion. Asking a parent or an alumnus to give money, telling a student why Western might be the school for her, advertising the university's international programs for grant-funding and governmental agencies--these were tasks that required different

strategies, different words, different voices. I was put in charge of a faculty newsletter no one wanted to read, so I started a series on faculty research, interviewing faculty and creating a new forum. People started reading the newsletter.

And then there were changes in my writing because at work I used a word processor, making revision as easy and natural as a keystroke and writing a process where first draft, second, etc. were terms that no longer meant anything; where I could start anywhere and add, adjust, fix, revise, correct almost endlessly. For pieces the length I was writing, outlines became unnecessary. My usual marked-up first page, full of false starts and strike-throughs and inserted phrases, was a thing of the past. Writing could flow, become fluent. The architectural sentences I wrote as a student, clauses stacked like building blocks with semicolons and colons providing the glue, were obsolete. For appearance's sake, "writing to fit," I went back to Sheridan Baker and Strunk & White (4) for ways to become a much more economical writer.

This year I am mostly teaching 101, not 102. My students keep journals and we use Helping Circles with most papers. I am grading portfolios of revised work rather than separately grading each piece; I think new college freshmen need time to catch on. The text I am using emphasizes journal writing, inner experience, Jungian journeys of the self. This expressive type of writing and the readings in this text are things I enjoy, and, perhaps surprisingly, so do my students. Several assignments I have borrowed or developed myself to encourage extensive prewriting and to work with material from personal experience--"Neighbors"

and "Stepping Stones" are examples--have produced fascinating papers.

But in many ways I find the same dissatisfaction I had with 102 last spring: some assignments just don't have a clear enough purpose, a reason for being. Again, thanks to Fulkerson, I see the main problem: I have oriented the course around "expressive" values, but I want results successful according to rhetorical values. And, because of the common midterm and final, my students' work is being judged according to formalist values; often, someone will put the holistic score but then list types and numbers of errors and exactly where they occur.

Oddly enough, the most gratifying assignment to read last fall was the most frivolous. To reinforce the need for detailed description, I passed out matched Tarot cards from two different decks and had the students imagine what, together, the two cards meant. They wrote the paper as if telling this composite fortune to an imagined inquirer. They had purpose, audience, and voice.

But were they dealing with the materials of the world in a meaningful way? Or even the materials of their own lives? In other words, was there any <u>substance</u> to struggle with, to wrestle into clarity, to sigh over with relief when it was well said?

Someone told me the other day that the only way to teach writing is to teach your own process. I could not write one of my colleague's fill-in-the-blank essays. Except for a very few purposes, I'm not sure I would write the five-paragraph theme with Baker's funnel introduction and inverted funnel conclusion, though I still think it's a useful model and I show this picture

to students who are having a hard time with structure. Just recently, I began to write essays with my students and realized why I have put it off so long: fear. It's the same fear that makes me procrastinate in my own writing projects, but maybe worse, because in this writing I can speak for myself, not an institution. Will I be able to get my experience into words? Will the actual piece of writing be as good as I want it to be? Will I be embarrassed by the results?

Once upon a time, when I was a graduate teaching assistant, I didn't ask such questions. I didn't worry so much about student writing. Disembodiment didn't really matter in a clearly written, well organized, mechanically accurate essay. I had no urge to write along with students. But all living is teaching and learning, and my life in the "real world" has made me a different person, a different teacher. I can't go back to the way I was, and I don't want to. Like my students, I must start from where I am now, what I am now.

For me, teaching itself is a rather new phase of life, and, like my colleague in the next office, I should be keeping a teaching journal of successes and failures, ideas for improvements. Surely I could work more of the strengths of professional writing into the freshman composition course. So far, letter writing has been my most frequent solution, because it makes audience and rhetorical situation easy for students to adopt. I want to do more with real situations, argumentative prose. I want more essays, but essays that don't sound canned. My next textbook will make it easier to transfer the strengths of my professional writing experience to the classroom.

And so there will be stepping stones to help us get to the other side of the moat--not to an ivory tower but to the figurative castle from which, as royals in charge of our real selves and our real experience, we can wield and teach real word-power for a world of reality. I was changed by CCCC in Chicago last year; and I go home from CCCC in Boston changed again. My world of reality includes the Mark Parkers with their baseball caps and pickup trucks. Engaging that world is the only way I can find matter solid enough to support our next steps--mine and theirs as well.

NOTES

1. Sheridan Baker, The Practical Stylist, 3rd ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973), p. 25.

2. Erika Lindemann points out some of the advantages and disadvantages of the five-paragraph theme, with its classical history, in A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1987), pp. 159-161.

3. Richard Fulkerson, "Composition Theory in the Eighties: Axiological Consensus and Paradigmatic Diversity," College Composition and Communication, 41(4) (December 1990), 409-429.

4. William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, The Elements of Style, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

HANDOUT

"A Real-World Writer Re-enters the Classroom:
Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones"

by Elizabeth Addison
CCCC, Boston, Mass., March 23, 1991

Mark Parker's Writing on Poetry -- UNABRIDGED

Assignment 1 (out of class): "Is My Team Plowing"

The author's attitude toward death in this poem is of how a man after dying wonders of the things he cared about. This can be seen as he talks of his girlfriend by saying, "Is my girl happy...And has she tired of weeping as she lies down at eve?" This is also seen as the author talks about his team of horses plowing, the soccer games he used to attend, and also his best friend.

The author uses many poetic elements in this poem to convey his attitude toward death. The theme of the poem is how a man dies and ultimately loses his girlfriend to his best friend. This also shows the irony in the poem. The author also uses rhyme in the poem which shows in every other line by saying, "That I used to drive...when I was man alive?" The tone of the poem is one of sadness and regret of dying.

Assignment 2 (in-class):

Dear Mr. President,

Guess what my English professor made me do? You ain't gonna guess so quit trying. She made us read about 6 or 7 billion poems and told us to pick one to write about. I don't know how she expects me to write it. I had to get my little sister to take down this letter. [This is of course a lie; this assignment was written in class and all three assignments were in the same handwriting.] But anyway, there was one of them there poems that was about plowin' so I figured I did tell about that. But that wasn't all she wanted. She wanted us to say how many of these terms (that I didn't even know what they was) were used in this poem and how they was used, too. I didn't know what they was so I just kinda made somethin' up, kinda like what I says 'bout the rest of the poem. 'Bout all I could figure was that some fella died, lost his girlfriend to his best friend, and during all that time his crops went bad. I don't blame him for dyin' the way you high and mighty folks treat the farmers. Well, I just figured I'd let you know what she done.

Thanks,
Mark H. Parker
"Country Bumpkin"

Assignment 3 (in-class):

Dear LCE Chairman:

In response to your request for me to recommend ideas to entertain Brendan Galvin during his stay in Cullowhee, I have come up with the following ideas.

Mr. Galvin enjoys going sailing, so I thought that I could take him sailing mountain style. I can rent a canoe and equipment from the University Center for almost nothing, and I am an experienced paddler on the Tuckaseigee River so there will be no extra expense for a guide.

If Mr. Galvin likes hunting for Mr. Tea Bag [reference to a specific poem] maybe he'll like hunting for ginseng. There is no cost factor for this also, because I have a topographical map of some good locations and a truck equipped to get there.

I figure on the last two days we could just show him around Western North Carolina and Tennessee. Maybe we could go up through Cherokee or across the Blue Ridge Parkway to Gatlinburg, then over to Pigeon Forge. [Note: some geographical confusion here; the Parkway does not go to Gatlinburg.]

If you have any other suggestions, I will be happy to consider them.

Sincerely,
Mark H. Parker